

Blair Nelsen, Director
Governmental Affairs, Eastern Region
SCI Management
Representing SCI Connecticut

February 20, 2013

Dear Senator Gerratana, Representative Johnson and members of the Public Health Committee.

Good afternoon, my name is Blair Nelsen, I appear before you today representing SCI Connecticut, which owns 18 funeral homes in the state, to urge your support for HB 5244-5744, which would enable both small and large funeral homes to allow outside services to provide catering at their facilities.

As with almost any industry, the funeral service sector is changing. Consumers expect more from us, just as they have come to expect more services from the various stores and businesses they frequent daily. No longer is it acceptable for a grocery store to sell only groceries; consumers expect delis, bakeries, pharmacies and prepared food sections, all of which make their shopping experience more enjoyable and convenient. So, too, have these consumers come to expect more from our industry. We serve families at a very difficult time. Anything we can do to ease the burden of planning funerals is a service our clients increasingly expect. In addition to planning the funeral, purchasing flowers and monuments, consumers expect us to assist them with planning the entire funeral experience, including receptions. In other states in which we operate, consumers have come to appreciate our ability to provide catering for their family and guests. In fact, a JD Power survey revealed 62% of our clients arranged receptions, while 42% indicated they would purchase the reception and catering from the funeral home, if offered. These surveys show an increase in client satisfaction by 7% when families select catering services. Clearly, consumers want catering.

As a fourth generation funeral director, I have experienced first-hand the necessity to change with the times, in order to meet the needs of our consumers. My family firm offered catering in each of our locations. My experience was that families preferred the convenience of being able to have a reception onsite. Several local pastors thanked us for this service, as their aging congregations struggled to continue to offer meals to families post funeral service.

One of the chief concerns, as I understand it in CT, has to do with food preparation in a funeral home. We do not prepare food in our CT funeral homes, rather we work with local caterers, to provide the food for our families. There is no sanitary issue, as the personnel who serve the food are catering employees. Food is served in rooms separate from where the deceased is located, so, again, there is no sanitary or public health issue.

You have heard many reasons why some funeral directors feel catering should not be offered. Frankly, most of these reasons are excuses for not wanting to offer the service. Let me address several of these.

Liability issues for people who might become ill: Every business carries insurance, which would deal with this. Additionally, all caterers carry insurance to cover this, which would cover catering offered to funeral home clients.

Increased overhead costs and the potential for increase in the price of funerals: The Federal Trade Commission Funeral Rule requires funeral homes to charge only for services selected by a client. If a funeral home prices catering services and use of the facility for receptions properly, there should be no increase in the cost of funerals to other consumers. Additionally, funeral homes stand to earn more revenue, which will offset any operating costs. Families should be allowed to select and pay for the services they desire. Many families will want to select this option, regardless of cost. We have surveyed more than 45 states where families are more satisfied with the overall services received when catering is selected. This is purely enabling legislation, funeral homes could still opt to not offer this service, if they so choose, it would not be mandated.

Competitive disadvantage for funeral homes without adequate facilities: This is truly an argument to restrict competition. If a funeral home is able to offer catering, it should not be restricted from doing so, due to the fact that another funeral home might not have these facilities. In our three funeral homes, only one had a dedicated facility. We were able to offer families catering in other locations, through the creative use of space, for example, closing off unused parlors or chapels as reception rooms for specific services. Some funeral homes may choose to offer catering to families at an off-site location, which is already allowed by law in Connecticut.

A funeral home may be forced to offer food and beverage to remain competitive: Funeral homes will not be forced to offer food and beverage. However, families who want this type of service will obtain it elsewhere such as, restaurants and/or local hotel facilities. Why should a funeral home, which wishes to be innovative, be restricted from offering catering?

Public Health regulations and compliance for food service can be difficult and costly (Board of Health inspectors, permits, special training for staff members): Again, as food and beverage are offered by catering services, this issue is not in question. Funeral homes are allowed to offer catering to families in 47 states and the regulations and compliance for food service has never been a problem or proven costly to the regulatory agency or the consumer. Also, a Federal District Court recently ruled in Pennsylvania that the law to prohibit food in a funeral home is unconstitutional.

The dignity of the service we offer to the living and the care of the deceased do not warrant food and beverage: Funeral service is changing at a very rapid pace. Families are choosing different types of services than they did 20 years ago. In order to grow vibrant businesses, especially in this economy, we must evolve. Across the country, many funeral homes are embracing the idea of offering other types of services to families. Every family is unique and we should provide options to make their experience as easy and satisfying as possible.

For all these reasons, I hope you will strongly support this legislation and allow everyone the opportunity to avail themselves of the comfort and convenience of on-site food and beverage service offered in connection with funeral services. We believe this to be both a consumer and jobs friendly bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration.